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Senior citizens tend to spend less time 'doing' and focus on 'being'

✍ By Renee Beasley Jones Messenger-Inquirer

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The Rev. Pat Connell used to question why his aging father preferred being outdoors.

Now, at age 67, the retired Episcopalian priest understands far better.

Connell wakes early. At first light, he and his great dane Tigo head outside to stand on the rim of a pond near the house. With Tigo at his side, the priest lifts his hands and repeats morning prayers.

Instead of heading back inside, Connell sits on his porch to meditate.

Nature seems to intensify the connection between God and man, Connell recently told members of the Green River Area Development District's Mental Health and Aging Coalition.

As people age, the attraction to nature becomes almost irresistible.

"Take your shoes off and walk through the grass," Connell said. "Connect with the earth and connect with God."

If elderly loved ones can't get outside, bring nature to them -- even if it's as simple as giving them a potted plant to tend in their rooms, he said.

Don't think about gardening as a way to occupy an older person's time. Think of it as an avenue some find their deepest connection with God.

Connell admits: He has no credentials to talk about aging other than personal observations and experience.

He served as an ordained priest 37 years. He retired from Trinity Episcopal Church and now works as a "supply priest" in Rockport, Indiana.

He's a master gardener who holds a seat on the Western Kentucky Botanical Garden board of directors.

In college, he earned a bachelor's degree in biology, so his thinking naturally gravitates toward all things natural.

Just as caterpillars turn into butterflies, senior citizens often experience a spiritual metamorphosis, he told his audience.

During the first half of life, people spend time building careers, finding partners, creating families and accumulating things. They busy themselves with doing, Connell said.

"Our identity is important in the first half of life," he said. "Our identity is found in things."

Over time, ego and the accumulation of things take a back seat. That allows the meaning of life to take center stage.

As folks age, it's almost as if a new creature emerges, Connell said. "There is a metamorphosis in our spirituality as we age."

Senior citizens are more concerned with being rather than doing, he said. In that state of mind, people connect with God in ways they couldn't when they were young.

Often, older residents question long-held truths about religion. It's important to give them permission to explore.

"In my perspective, God is big enough to love everyone in their exploration," Connell said.

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